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ABSTRACT

As use of the Internet and the World Wide Web increases, patrons expect that organizations will utilize the technology, and outdoor programs can benefit from doing so. Web sites can be thought of as miniature information booths containing information an agency wants to make available to the public. Outdoor programs can use the Web for many tasks, including: 1) planning and trip facilitation (maps, estimates of mileage, route selection, driving time, weather and environmental conditions such as river flows, emergency care facilities in the vicinity of the trip, and permit regulations and fee information); 2) facilitating communication among staff members through combined use of e-mail and an organizational Web site; 3) providing information to participants such as contact information, lists of things to bring, and answers to frequently asked questions; 4) providing program information to the community such as hours of operation, location of the program, policies for renting equipment, signing up for trips, getting refunds, and posting the program catalog; and 5) sharing resource information through links to other recreation areas, reference sites, instructional sites, and equipment manufacturers. Two Web sites of university outdoor programs are briefly described. (TD)

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OUTDOOR PROGRAMS ON-LINE: CREATING A LINK WITH PARTICIPANTS, STAFF AND COMMUNITY

Raymond Poff

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Society is quickly changing. These changes have been triggered by a number of different factors ranging from values to finances to the pursuit of a 'better life.' Among these changes include one that is spreading quickly throughout the world with its influence being felt almost everywhere. This change is affecting several aspects of how people live their everyday lives. This change is the increased use of the Internet and the World Wide Web. It is changing the way that we learn, do research, shop for a new car, and decide where to go on vacation. This paper is not intended to be technical or research-based in nature, but rather to introduce the Internet and World Wide Web and their usefulness to the campus outdoor recreation program professional.

Today's student can conduct decision-making research on their computer at all hours of the day and night. They can retrieve or send information on virtually any subject in the world to virtually anywhere in the world. Students can register for classes on-line, book reservations for a spring break trip, and shop for the latest. They use the information highway to gather information and make decisions regarding their leisure time and resources. Could the Outdoor Program professional benefit from making use of this resource?

This paper focuses on Outdoor Programs using the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW or Web) to better serve patrons, community, and staff. The author believes that: 1) these resources are becoming more readily available to patrons and that these patrons expect organizations to utilize the available technology and 2) that outdoor programs can benefit from doing so. The paper consists of three main topic areas related to outdoor program use of the Internet and WWW. 1) Introduction to the Internet and the World Wide Web, 2) Outdoor programs on the Web, and 3) Website components – uses.

Introduction to the Internet and the World Wide Web

According to Rick Curtis of Princeton University, "The Internet is an inter-connection of different computer networks that allows for easy transfer of information across the globe" (Curtis, 1995, p. 1). The Internet began as a project of the Department of Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency in the 1960s and was built up by other government sponsored networks over the years (Cerf, 1995). A commercial system of networks was established and has since replaced the government sponsored system (Cerf, 1995). The Internet allows such things as E-mail, file transfer, and the World Wide Web (Curtis, 1995).

The World Wide Web, also referred to as simply the Web, is the "part of the Internet supporting graphics, audio, video, and hypertext links (the ability to connect from one computer to another), as well as standard text" (McLean, 1996). The Web is composed of many websites or home pages. These pages are locations on the Internet containing information that has been put together by the user to share with the rest of the world. Chances are, the Web probably has something of interest to anyone.

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Another change that is taking place in today's world is the ever increasing number of available recreational opportunities. However, time and money forces many people to choose between activities. Some will stay at home and watch television and others will get out and do something. A new activity called "surfing the Internet" has entered the arena and is successfully capturing the leisure time of people around the world. Interestingly enough, though many would argue that they did not enjoy their school day homework, millions are using the Web to do research. The Web provides easy access to information on just about anything and people are fascinated with its treasure trove. Some are satisfied surfing for the sake of surfing, while others surf looking for specific information and things to do. This second group is the population of current interest.

Outdoor Programs on the Web

Outdoor recreation professionals have an opportunity to utilize the Web in order to provide potential customer with information about things to do with their programs. As mentioned previously, a website is the most common method of sharing information on the Web. Websites could be thought of as miniature information booths containing information an agency wants to make available for people. A car company would likely include information on each model they manufacture accompanied by snazzy pictures of each model and the key selling points. A campus outdoor recreation program can do the very same thing with information on its services, programs, special events, etc. A brief look at two different outdoor program sites follows.

Indiana University Outdoor Adventures (IUOA)
(http://www.indiana.edu/~imupromo/entertainment/outfitters/outfitters.html)

IUOA provides outdoor recreation trips, skills courses, team building, rental equipment, retail items and other services to the community. The author's first exposure to the Web and outdoor programs was in 1995 while designing a site for IUOA then known as Indiana Memorial Union Outfitters. Since designing the original site, the maintenance and design duties have been the responsibility of another department, but the basic ideas and content have remained the same. Like other recreation agencies, they publish a catalog containing information on all of their trips, courses, rental equipment, etc. The 'Outfitters' decided to include all of the information from their catalog and additional information such as a welcome section with a message from the director. It also contained basic information about the Outfitters and their services. There was a section with the photos and short bio's of the staff and volunteers that worked with the program. This allowed the potential participant to get to a brief introduction to the people they may be spending a week with on a backpacking trip. This site included a listing of each trip and course being offered during that semester, a description of each, and some photos. The site also included a list of recreation Internet resources that would be of interest to the user.

Brigham Young University Outdoors Unlimited
(http://www.byu.edu/sas/outdoors)

This site is very similar to IUOA's site in the types of information presented. A primary difference is in the use of a few more sophisticated techniques. These techniques help achieve a greater level of visual appeal and make navigating the site more interesting.

These features are not without cost in that they do take longer to load than simpler designs. The author of this article and the site designer made a conscious decision when designing the site acknowledging the increased load time and decided that the target audience would primarily access the site from on campus and that the load times would not be as critical.

This site does provides information such as a map and directions to BYU Outdoors Unlimited; rental equipment available; trips offered; a comprehensive listing of bicycle and ski repair services; links to retail vendors; and program policies and procedures such as those related to rental equipment.

Both of these sites provide the basic information that students and community members would be likely to look for. The sites are designed well and present the programs in a professional and appropriate manner. The image portrayed is positive and seeks to serve the needs of the programs.

Website Components – Uses

Outdoor programs could utilize the Web for many different tasks. A few categories include: 1) Planning and trip facilitation; 2) Coordinating with program staff; 3) Communicating with participants; 4) Communicating with the community; and 5) Sharing resource information. A brief discussion of each of these areas follows.

Planning and Trip Facilitation

The Web can be used a resource throughout the process of planning a trip. The Web can be used to look for an idea of where one would like to run a trip. A preliminary review of the area and area resources can be examined and matched against the needs of the group. Sites such as 'MapQuest' at www.mapquest.com can be used to estimate mileage, route selection, driving times, directions, and traveling maps.

Weather conditions and river flows can also be obtained to help the trip leader anticipate the environmental conditions likely to be present on a trip before leaving. Emergency care facilities can be located on the way to and from the trip location. Permit regulations and fee information may be available for some areas.

By using the Web outdoor program staff can save money in phone calls and postage trying to gather basic information. Save the money for specific questions that may need to be answered in person.

Coordinating Program Staff

A combined use of an organizational website and E-mail can facilitate communication among staff members. This is especially helpful when working with a large staff. E-mail is a common way of notifying staff members of announcements such as meetings, and changes in plans. By using password protected pages in a website, an organization can have non-public information available on-line for program staff. One application of this could be individual training records of the staff members so they could readily access the information and determine what items they should be working on. A secure sight could be used to make training guidelines and in house reference information available. Before incorporating non-public information into a website, consulting legal counsel of the college or university may be appropriate. They may be able to help determine if specific kinds of information create possible liability concerns.

Many professional recreation organizations have sites on the Web. Having links to sites related to your program can benefit the outdoor program professional and outdoor program staff. The sites provide an opportunity to keep in touch with what's going on in the organization and in recreation.. The recreation professional can use these sites to keep up to date with trends in recreation and share the information with their organization.

Professional development is important to the continued success of recreation and it can be as simple as reading an article on the Web. Professional recreation organizations on the WWW help bridge the geographical gap between professionals around the globe. They also advertise the benefits of membership in the organization for the potential member. These sites give those outside of recreation the opportunity to look in and see what recreation is really all about. Recreation organizations have the chance to promote our values and convictions to people around the globe. Organizations could include such things as newsletters, research work, conference information, and published articles.

Communicating with Participants

Even though we print catalogs and tell participants whens and wheres, people forget and need to access information at the last minute. Sites can include contact information for trip leaders, pre-trip meeting times/place, lists of things to bring on a given trip, and a section with frequently asked questions (often called FAQ). A major benefit of a website is the ability to update information quickly. A combination of updating information on the web and sending e-mail may assist programs when things change and they need to contact multiple people.

Communicating with the Community

A website should contain basic information about your program. This may include hours of operation, location of your program (students often don't know where the outdoor program is), general policies for renting equipment, signing up for trips, getting a refund, and so forth.

As briefly mentioned earlier, many outdoor programs publish a catalog during each semester of the school year. These catalogs contain information that is critical to the community and potential participant; websites can be used to share that same information. A typical catalog may include such information as: 1) a listing of available programs and respective information on each (i.e. dates and times, registration fees, etc.); 2) calendar of special events for the campus community; 3) a statement of organization purpose, and services offered; and 4) a listing of rental equipment. What do you do when, after the paper catalogs have been sent out, you realize that there was a mistake on the dates of one of your most popular programs? Hopefully you will start getting phone calls and visits from students trying to register, only to find out that the printed date was wrong and they have other plans for the correct date. You will try to explain the error in the catalog and you're sorry for the inconvenience. If this information had been available on the Web, you could have changed the information as soon as the mistake was discovered and perhaps prevented some frustration. This is not a suggestion to abandon paper catalogs, but rather an acknowledgement that today's technology is offering us another approach to publishing important information.

These are only a few ways to communicate with the community. Outdoor programs need to use their imagination when creating sites and make sure that their site matches the

needs of its own community. Another benefit to a website is that is a consistent source of information. Community members can return to a site as often as they want and whenever they want; a website is open 24-7 long after you've gone home or left on a trip.

Sharing resource information

Last of all, outdoor programs have an additional opportunity to educate and share information with the community, staff, and participants by providing a list of links to other outdoor recreation related sites. The possible entries for a reference list are endless, but there are some basic areas that you can cover that will get people started in finding the information that they need: 1) Links to outdoor recreation areas (National Park Service, BLM, etc.); 2) Local interest areas and information; 3) Reference links (weather, river flows, etc.); 4) instructional sites; and 5) Equipment manufactures. Basically, include the sites that your program uses and finds helpful.

Conclusion

If you decide that your organization needs a website you will need to consider who is going to set it up and maintain it. Chances are good that someone in your organization may have the skills and enthusiasm to do the project. If you ask someone in-house to do the work, please be sure that you can allot the time that they need to work on the project. Good websites can involve a lot of work and you want your organization to be presented in a positive manner. There are also people that design sites for a living and they are likely to be the most knowledgeable and up to date. Another option to consider is finding a student to do the initial design work of the site for you. "[W]ith the upsurge in technological competence seen in young people, professionals should welcome students' willingness to demonstrate what they know and can do with technology. This may be an excellent opportunity for the teacher [professional] to learn from the student" (McLean, 1995). Whatever option you choose, make sure that the when the website is finished, it portrays the image you want.

The Internet along with the World Wide Web appear to be here to stay. The techniques used to create websites will change along with many other aspects of the internet, but the main concept of being able to provide information to a global audience is not going to disappear. Besides 'entertainment' value, today's student is looking for useful information to be on-line. Outdoor recreation professionals need to keep up with people's interests and be aware of the ever changing technological environment. Web pages are not a cure all; they are merely another form of publishing information. It is a fun medium for people to use and that is why they use it. Outdoor programs can make effective of this resource and facilitate the sharing of many types of information. Who knows, the information on your program's website may even encourage people to get away from their computers for a weekend to enjoy the outdoors ☺

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Biographical Sketch

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